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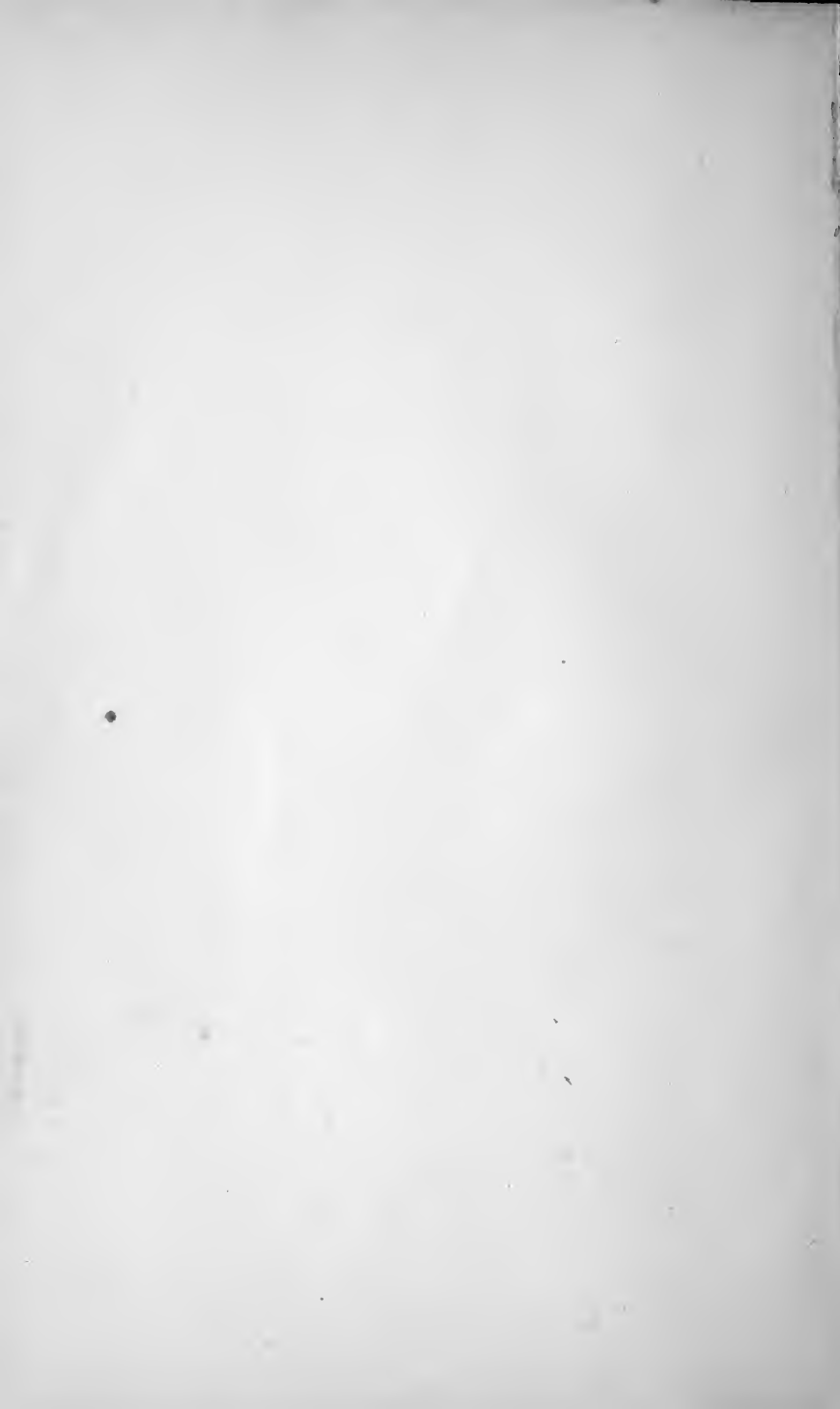
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# MATTHEW ARNOLD

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BY

FREDERIC HARRISON



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New York  
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AND LONDON  
1896

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Norwood Press  
J. S. Cushing & Co. — Berwick & Smith  
Norwood Mass. U.S.A.

E. A. W. Dec. 1, 18.





## MATTHEW ARNOLD.<sup>1</sup>

THE very name of Matthew Arnold calls up to memory a set of apt phrases and proverbial labels which have passed into our current literature, and are most happily redolent of his own peculiar turn of thought. How could modern criticism be carried on, were it forbidden to speak of 'culture,' of 'urbanity,' of 'Philistinism,' of 'distinction,' of 'the *note* of provinciality,' of 'the great style'? What a convenient shorthand is it to refer to 'Barbarians,' to 'the young lions of the Press,' to 'Bottles,' to 'Arminius,' to 'the Zeit-Geist' — and all the personal and impersonal objects of our great critic's genial contempt!

It is true that our young lions (whose feeding time appears to be our breakfast hour) have roared themselves almost hoarse over some of these sayings and nicknames, and even the 'note of provinciality' has become a little provincial. But how many of these pregnant phrases have been added to the debates of philosophy and even of religion! 'The stream of tendency that makes for righteousness,' 'sweetness and light' — not wholly in Swift's sense, and assuredly not in Swift's temper either of spirit or of brain — 'sweet reasonableness,' '*das gemeine*, the '*Aberglaube*,' are more than mere labels or phrases: they are ideas, gospels — at least, aphorisms. The judicious reader may recall the rest of these epigrams for himself, for to set forth any copious catalogue of them would be to indite a somewhat leonine essay oneself. Lord Beacons-

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field, himself so great a master of memorable and prolific phrases, with admirable insight recognised this rare gift of our Arminius, and he very justly said that it was a 'great thing to do—a great achievement.'

Now this gift of sending forth to ring through a whole generation a phrase which immediately passes into a proverb, which stamps a movement or a set of persons with a distinctive cognomen, or condenses a mode of judging them into a portable aphorism—this is a very rare power, and one peculiarly rare amongst Englishmen. Carlyle had it, Emerson and Lowell had it, Disraeli had it, but how few others amongst our contemporaries! Arnold's current phrases still in circulation are more numerous than those of Disraeli, and are more simple and apt than Carlyle's. These *ἔπεα πτερόεντα* fly through the speech of cultivated men, pass current in the market-place; they are generative, efficient, and issue into act. They may be right or wrong, but at any rate they do their work: they teach, they guide, possibly may mislead, but they are alive. It was noteworthy, and most significant, how many of these familiar phrases of Arnold's were Greek. He was never tired of recommending to us the charms of 'Hellenism,' of *εὐφυΐα*, of *epieikeia*, the supremacy of Homer, 'the classical spirit.' He loved to present himself to us as *εὐφυής*, as *ἐπιεικής*, as *καλοκάγαθός*; he had been sprinkled with some of the Attic salt of Lucian, he was imbued with the classical genius—and never so much so as in his poems.

## I. THE POET.

( His poetry had the classical spirit in a very peculiar and rare degree, and we can have little doubt now, when so much of Arnold's prose work in criticism has been accepted as standard opinion, and so much of his prose work

in controversy has lost its interest and savour, that it is his poetry which will be longest remembered,) and there his finest vein was reached.) It may be said that no poet in the roll of our literature, unless it be Milton, has been so truly saturated to the very bone with the classical genius. And I say this without forgetting the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, or the *Prometheus Unbound*, or *Atalanta in Calydon*; for I am thinking of the entire compass of all the productions of these poets who are very often romantic and fantastic. But we can find hardly a single poem of Arnold's that is far from the classical idea.

His poetry, however, is 'classical' only in general sense, not that all of it is imitative of ancient models, or has any affectation of archaism. It is essentially modern in thought, and has all that fetishistic worship of natural objects which is the true note of our Wordsworthian school. But Arnold is 'classical' in the serene self-command, the harmony of tone, the measured fitness, the sweet reasonableness of his verse. This balance, this lucidity, this Virgilian dignity and grace, may be said to be unailing. Whatever be its shortcomings and its limitations, Arnold's poetry maintains this unerring urbanity of form. There is no thunder, no rant, no discord, no intoxication of mysticism, or crash of battle in him. Our poet's eye doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven; but it is never caught 'in a fine frenzy rolling.' It is in this sense that Arnold is classical, that he has, and has uniformly and by instinct, some touch of that 'liquid clearness of an Ionian sky' which he felt in Homer. Not but what he is, in thought and by suggestion, one of the most truly modern, the most frankly contemporary of all our poets.

It is no doubt owing to this constant appeal of his to modern thought, and in great degree to the best and most serious modern thought, that Arnold's poetry is welcomed

by a somewhat special audience. But for that very reason, it is almost certain to gain a wider audience, and to grow in popularity and influence. His own prose has perhaps not a little retarded the acceptance of his verse. The prose is of far greater bulk than his verse: it deals with many burning questions, especially those of current politics and theological controversies; and it supplies whole menageries of young lions with perennial bones of contention and succulent morsels wherewith to lick their lips. How could the indolent, or even the industrious reviewer, tear himself from the delight of sucking in 'the three Lord Shaftesburys' — or it may, be from spitting them forth with indignation — in order to meditate with Empedocles or Thyrsis in verses which are at once 'sober, steadfast, and demure.'

The full acceptance of Arnold's poetry has yet to come. And in order that it may come in our time, we should be careful not to overpraise him, not to credit him with qualities that he never had. His peculiar distinction is his unfailing level of thoughtfulness, of culture, and of balance. Almost alone amongst our poets since Milton, Arnold is never incoherent, spasmodic, careless, washy, or *banal*. He never flies up into a region where the sun melts his wings; he strikes no discords, and he never tries a mood for which he has no gift. He has more general insight into the intellectual world of our age, and he sees into it more deeply and more surely than any contemporary poet. He has a trained thirst for Nature; but his worship of Nature never weakens his reverence of Man, and his brooding over man's destiny. On the other hand, he has little passion, small measure of dramatic sense, but a moderate gift of movement or of colour, and — what is perhaps a more serious want — no sure ear for melody and music.

As poet, Arnold belongs to an order very rare with us,

in which Greece was singularly rich, the order of *gnomic* poets, who condensed in metrical aphorisms their thoughts on human destiny and the moral problems of life. The type is found in the extant fragments of Solon, of Xenophanes, and above all of Theognis. The famous maxim of Solon — *μηδὲν ἄγαν* (nothing overdone) — might serve as a maxim for Arnold. But of all the gnomic poets of Greece, the one with whom Arnold has most affinity is Theognis. Let us compare the 108 fragments of Theognis, as they are paraphrased by J. Hookham Frere, with the collected poems of Arnold, and the analogy will strike us at once: the stoical resolution, the disdain of vulgarity, the aversion from civic brawls, the aloofness both from the rudeness of the populace and the coarseness of ostentatious wealth. The seventeenth fragment of Theognis, as arranged by Frere, might serve as a motto for Arnold's poems and for Arnold's temper.

I walk by rule and measure, and incline  
To neither side, but take an even line;  
Fix'd in a single purpose and design.  
With learning's happy gifts to celebrate,  
To civilize and dignify the State;  
Not leaguings with the discontented crew,  
Nor with the proud and arbitrary few.

This is the very key-note of so many poems, of *Culture and Anarchy*, of 'sweetness and light,' of *epieikeia*; it is the tone of the *euphues*, of the *τετράγωνος ἀνευ ψόγου*, of the 'wise and good.'

This intensely gnomic, meditative, and ethical vein in Arnold's poetry runs through the whole of his singularly equable work, from the earliest sonnets to the latest domestic elegies. His Muse, as he sings himself, is ever —

Radiant, adorn'd outside; a hidden ground  
Of thought and of austerity within.

This deep undertone of thought and of austerity gives a uniform and somewhat melancholy colour to every line of his verse, not despairing, not pessimist, not querulous, but with a resolute and pensive insight into the mystery of life and of things, reminding us of those lovely tombs in the Cerameicus at Athens, of Hegeso and the rest, who in immortal calm and grace, stand ever bidding to this fair earth a long and sweet farewell. Like other gnomic poets, Arnold is ever running into the tone of elegy; and he is quite at his best in elegy. Throughout the whole series of his poems it would be difficult to find any, even the shorter sonnets, which did not turn upon this pensive philosophy of life, unless we hold the few Narrative Poems to be without it. His mental food he tells us was found in Homer, Sophocles, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius; and his graver pieces sound like some echo of the imperial *Meditations*, cast into the form of a Sophoclean chorus.

Of more than one hundred pieces, short or long, that Arnold has left, only a few here and there can be classed as poems of fancy, pure description, or frank surrender of the spirit to the sense of joy and of beauty. Whether he is walking in Hyde Park or lounging in Kensington Gardens, apostrophising a gipsy child, recalling old times in Rugby Chapel, mourning over a college friend, or a dead bird, or a pet dog, he always comes back to the dominant problems of human life. As he buries poor 'Geist,' he speculates on the future life of man; as he laments 'Matthias' dying in his cage, he moralises on the limits set to our human sympathy. With all his intense enjoyment of Nature, and his acute observation of nature, it never ends there. One great lesson, he says, Nature is ever teaching, it is blown in every wind — the harmony of labour and of peace — *ohne Hast, ohne Rast*. Every natural sight and sound has its moral warning: a yellow primrose is not a

primrose to him, and nothing more: it reveals the poet of the primrose. The ethical lesson of Nature, which is the uniform burden of Arnold's poetry, has been definitely summed up by him in the sonnet to a preacher who talked loosely of our 'harmony with Nature.'

Know, man hath all which Nature hath, but more,  
And in that *more* lie all his hopes of good.

Not only is Arnold what Aristotle called *ἠθικώτατος*, a moralist in verse, but his moral philosophy of life and man is at once large, wise, and deep. He is abreast of the best modern thought, and he meets the great problems of destiny and what is now called the 'foundations of belief,' like a philosopher and not like a rhetorician, a sentimentalist, or a theologian. The essential doctrine of his verse is the spirit of his own favourite hero, Marcus Aurelius, having (at least in aspiration if not in performance) the same stoicism, dignity, patience, and gentleness, and no little of the same pensive and ineffectual resignation under insoluble problems. Not to institute any futile comparison of genius, it must be conceded that Arnold in his poetry dwells in a higher philosophic æther than any contemporary poet. He has a wider learning, a cooler brain, and a more masculine logic. However superior in fancy and in melody, when Tennyson deals with the mysteries of philosophy, too often he descends into the vague commonplaces of hymnology, or the devotional rhapsodies of an ambitious curate denouncing the heresies of Darwin. And Browning, with all his mastery of dramatic psychology, has neither the philosophic training, nor the grasp of the ultimate problem of Man and his Environment which the instructed mind finds ever to the front with Arnold. It was not in vain that Arnold was so early inspired by echoes of Empedocles, to whom his earliest important

poem was devoted, the philosopher-poet of early Greece, whom the Greeks called Homeric, and whose 'austere harmony' they valued so well. Arnold's sonnet on 'The Austerity of Poetry,' of which two lines have been cited above, is a mere amplification of this type of poetry as an idealized philosophy of nature and of life.

This concentration of poetry on ethics and even metaphysics involves very serious limitations and much loss of charm. The gnomic poets of Greece, though often cited for their maxims, were the least poetic of the Greek singers, and the least endowed with imagination. Aristotle calls Empedocles more 'the natural philosopher than the poet.' Solon indeed, with all his wisdom, can be as tedious as Wordsworth, and Theognis is usually prosaic. Arnold is never prosaic, and almost never tedious: but the didactic poet cannot possibly hold the attention of the groundlings for long. *Empedocles on Etna*, published at the age of thirty-one, still remains his most characteristic piece of any length, and it is in some ways his high-water mark of achievement. It has various moods, lyrical, didactic, dramatic — rhyme, blank verse, monologue, and song — it has his philosophy of life, his passion for nature, his enthusiasm for the undying memories of Greece. It is his greatest poem: but the average reader finds it twelve hundred lines too long, too austere, too indecisive; and the poet himself withdrew it for years from a sense of its monotony of doubt and sadness, until he was encouraged by Browning to restore it to his collection.

(The high merit of Arnold's verse is the uniform level of fine, if austere, thought, embodied in clear, apt, graceful, measured form.) If Tennyson can at times break into a Hugonic shriekiness, and even into some pulpit maudlin, and at times almost cloy us with a surfeit of honey, if Browning can take a plunge into a mud-bath of uncouth-



ness and Wagnerian discords, if Swinburne once had his fits of histrionic hysterics and Aphrodisiac frenzies, Arnold keeps a firm hand on his Pegasus, and is always lucid, self-possessed, dignified, with a voice perfectly attuned to the feeling and thought within him. He always knew exactly what he wished to say, and he always said it exactly. He is thus one of the most correct, one of the least faulty, of all our poets, as Racine was 'correct' and 'faultless,' as in the supreme degree was the eternal type of all that is correct and faultless in form — Sophocles himself.

As a poet, Arnold was indeed our *Matteo senza errore*, but to be faultless is not to be of the highest rank, just as Andrea del Sarto in painting was not of the highest rank. And we must confess that in exuberance of fancy, in imagination, in glow and rush of life, in tumultuous passion, in dramatic pathos, Arnold cannot claim any high rank at all. He has given us indeed but little of the kind, and hardly enough to judge him. His charming farewell lines to his dead pets, the dogs, the canary, and the cat, are full of tenderness, quaint playfulness, grace, wit, worthy of Cowper. The *Forsaken Merman* and *Tristram and Iseult* have passages of delightful fancy and of exquisite pathos. If any one doubt if Arnold had a true imagination, apart from his gnomic moralities, let him consider the conclusion of *The Church of Brou*. The gallant Duke of Savoy, killed in a boar hunt, is buried by his young widow in a magnificent tomb in the memorial Church of Brou, and so soon as the work is completed, the broken-hearted Duchess dies and is laid beside him underneath their marble effigies. The poet stands beside the majestic and lonely monument, and he breaks forth : —

So sleep, for ever sleep, O marble Pair !  
Or, if ye wake, let it be then, when fair  
On the carved western front a flood of light

Streams from the setting sun, and colours bright  
 Prophets, transfigured Saints, and Martyrs brave,  
 In the vast western window of the nave ;  
 And on the pavement round the Tomb there glints  
 A chequer-work of glowing sapphire-tints,  
 And amethyst, and ruby — then uncloseth  
 Your eyelids on the stone where ye repose,  
 And from your broider'd pillows lift your heads,  
 And rise upon your cold white marble beds ;  
 And, looking down on the warm rosy tints,  
 Which chequer, at your feet, the illumined flints,  
 Say : *What is this ? we are in bliss — forgiven —*  
*Behold the pavement of the courts of Heaven !*  
 Or let it be on autumn nights, when rain  
 Doth rustlingly above your heads complain  
 On the smooth leaden roof, and on the walls  
 Shedding her pensive light at intervals  
 The moon through the clere-story window shines,  
 And the wind rushes through the mountain pines.  
 Then, gazing up 'mid the dim pillars high,  
 The foliaged marble forest where ye lie,  
*Hush, ye will say, it is eternity !*  
*This is the glimmering verge of Heaven, and there*  
*The columns of the heavenly palaces !*  
 And, in the sweeping of the wind, your ear  
 The passage of the Angels' wings will hear,  
 And on the lichen-crustled leads above  
 The rustle of the eternal rain of love.

I have cited this beautiful passage as a specimen of Arnold's poetic gift apart from his gnomic quality of lucid thought. It is not his usual vein, but it serves to test his powers as a mere singer. It has fancy, imagination, metrical grace, albeit with some penury of rhyme, perfection of tone. Has it the magic of the higher poetry, the ineffable music, the unforgotten phrase ? No one has ever analyzed the 'liquid diction,' 'the fluid movement' of great poetry so lucidly as Arnold himself. The fluid movement indeed he shows not seldom, especially in his blank verse.

*Sohrab and Rustum*, a fine poem all through, if just a little academic, has some noble passages, some quite majestic lines and Homero-eid similes. But the magic of music, the unforgotten phrase is not there. Arnold, who gave us in prose so many a memorable phrase, has left us in poetry hardly any such as fly upon the tongues of men, unless it be — ‘The weary Titan, staggering on to her goal,’ or ‘that sweet city with her dreaming spires.’ These are fine, but not enough.

Undoubtedly Arnold from the first continually broke forth into some really Miltonic lines. Of Nature he cries out : —

Still do thy sleepless ministers move on  
Their glorious tasks in silence perfecting —

Or again, he says,

Whereo’er the chariot wheels of life are roll’d  
In cloudy circles to eternity.

In the *Scholar-Gypsy*, he says,

Go, shepherd, and untie the wattled cotes !  
No longer leave thy wistful flock unfed.

Arnold has at times the fluid movement, but only at moments and on occasions, and he has a pure and highly trained sense of metrical rhythm. But he has not the yet finer and rarer sense of melodious music. We must even say more. He is insensitive to cacophonies that would have made Tennyson or Shelley ‘gasp and stare.’ No law of Apollo is more sacred than this : that he shall not attain the topmost crag of Parnassus who crams his mouth while singing with a handful of gritty consonants.

It is an ungracious task to point to the ugly features of poems that have unquestionably refined modulation and exquisite polish. But where Nature has withheld the ear for music, no labour and no art can supply the want. And

I would ask those who fancy that modulation and polish are equivalent to music to repeat aloud these lines amongst many : —

- The sandy spits, the shore-lock'd lakes. —
- Kept on after the grave, but not begun —
- Couldst thou no better keep, O Abbey old ! —
- The strange scrawl'd rocks, the lonely sky —
- From heaths starr'd with broom,  
And high rocks throw mildly  
On the blanch'd sands a gloom.

These last three verses from the *Forsaken Merman*, wherein Arnold perhaps came nearest to the echo of music and to pure fantasy. Again of Shakespeare has he not said that he was : —

Self-school'd, self-scann'd, self-honour'd, self-secure —

Here in one line are seven sibilants, four 'selves,' three *sc.*, and twenty-nine consonants against twelve vowels in one verse. It was not thus that Shakespeare himself wrote sonnets, as when he said : —

Full many a glorious morning have I seen  
Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye.

( It must be remembered that Arnold wrote but little verse, and most of it in early life, that he was not by profession a poet, that he was a hardworked inspector of schools all his days, and that his prose work far exceeds his verse. This separates him from all his contemporary rivals, and partly explains his stiffness in rhyming, his small product, and his lack of melody. Had he been able like Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, to regard himself from first to last as a poet, to devote his whole life to poetry, to live the life 'of thought and of austerity within' — which he craved as poet, but did not achieve as a man — then he might have left us poems

more varied, more fanciful, more musical, more joyous. By temperament and by training, he, who at birth, as he tells us, 'was breathed on by the rural Pan,' was deprived of that fountain of delight that is essential to the highest poetry, the dithyrambic glow — the ἀνήριθμον γέλασμα :—

The countless dimples of the laughing seas — <sup>1</sup>

of perennial poetry. This perhaps, more than his want of passion, of dramatic power, of rapidity of action, limits the audience of Arnold as a poet. But those who thirst for the pure Castalian spring, inspired by sustained and lofty thoughts, who care for that ~~that σπουδαίους~~ — that 'high seriousness,' of which he spoke so much as the very essence of the best poetry, — have long known that they find it in Matthew Arnold more than in any of his 'even greater contemporaries.'

## II. THE CRITIC

About Matthew Arnold as critic of literature it is needless to enlarge, for the simple reason that we have all long ago agreed that he has no superior, indeed no rival. His judgments on our poets have passed into current opinion, and have ceased to be discussed or questioned. It is, perhaps, a grave loss to English literature that Arnold was not able, or perhaps never strove, to devote his whole life to the interpretation of our best poetry and prose, with the same systematic, laborious, concentrated energy which has placed Sainte-Beuve at the head of French critics. With his absorbing professional duties, his hardly austere aloofness from the whirlpool of society, his guerilla warfare with journalism, Radicals, theologians, and all devotees of Dagon, it was not destined to be that Arnold could vie with

<sup>1</sup> E. H. Pember, Q.C.

the vast learning and Herculean industry of Sainte-Beuve. Neither as theologian, philosopher, nor as publicist, was Arnold at all adequately equipped by genius or education for the office of supreme arbiter in all knowledge which he so airily, and perhaps so humorously, assumed to fill. And as poet, it is doubtful whether, with his Aurelian temperament and treacherous ear, he could ever have reached a much higher rank. But as critic of literature, his exquisite taste, his serene sense of equity, and that genial magnanimity which prompted him to give just value for every redeeming quality of those whom he loved the least — this made him a consummate critic of style. Though he has not left us an exhaustive review of our literature, ~~as Sainte-Beuve has done for France~~, he has given us a group of short, lucid, suggestive canons of judgment, which serve as landmarks to an entire generation of critics.)

The function of criticism — though not so high and mighty as Arnold proclaimed it with superb assurance — is not so futile an art as the sixty-two minor poets and the 11,000 minor novelists are now wont to think it. Arnold committed one of the few extravagances of his whole life when he told us that poetry was 'the criticism of life,' that the function of criticism was 'to see all things as they really are in themselves' — the very thing Kant told us we could never do. On the other hand, too much of what is now called criticism is the improvised chatter of a raw lad, portentously ignorant of the matter in hand. It is not the 'indolent reviewer' that we now suffer under, but the 'lightning reviewer,' the young man in a hurry with a Kodak, who finally disposes of a new work on the day of its publication. One of them naively complained the other morning of having to cut the pages, as if we ever suspected that he cut the pages of more than the preface and table of contents.

Criticism, according to Arnold's practice, if not according to his theory of omniscience, had as its duty to lay down decisive canons of cultured judgment, to sift the sound from the vicious, and to maintain the purity of language and of style. To do all this in any masterly degree requires most copious knowledge, an almost encyclopædic training in literature, a natural genius for form and tone, and above all a temper of judicial balance. Johnson in the last century, Hallam, and possibly Southey, in this century, had some such gift: Macaulay and Carlyle had not; for they wanted genius for form and judicial balance. Now Arnold had this gift in supreme degree, in a degree superior to Johnson or to Hallam. He made far fewer mistakes than they did. He made very few mistakes. The touchstone of the great critic is to make very few mistakes, and never to be carried off his balance by any pet aversion or pet affection of his own, not to be biassed so much as a hair's breadth by any salient merit or any irritating defect, and always to keep an eye well open to the true proportion of any single book in the great world of men and of affairs, and in the mighty realm of general literature.

For this reason we have so very few great critics, for the combination of vast knowledge, keen taste, and serene judgment is rare. It is thus so hard for any young person, for women, to become great in criticism: the young lack the wide experience; women lack the cool judicial temper; they are too sympathetic, unwilling to see the faults where they admire and love, or to see merits where they dislike. It is common enough to find those who are very sensitive to some rare charm, very acute to detect a subtle quality, or justly severe on some seductive failure. The rare power is to be able to apply to a complicated set of qualities the nicely adjusted compensations, to place a work, an author,

in the right rank, and to do this for all orders of merit, with a sure, constant, unfailing touch — and without any real or conspicuous mistake.

This is what Arnold did, at any rate for our later poetry. He taught us to do it for ourselves, by using the instruments he brought to bear. He did much to kill a great deal of flashy writing, and much vulgarity of mind that once had a curious vogue. I am myself accused of being *laudator temporis acti*, and an American newspaper was pleased to speak of me as 'this hopeless old man'; but I am never weary of saying, that at no epoch of our literature has the bulk of minor poetry been so graceful, so refined, so pure; the English language in daily use has never been written in so sound a form by so many writers; and the current taste in prose and verse has never been so just. And this is not a little owing to the criticism of Arnold, and to the ascendancy which his judgment exerted over his time.

To estimate that lucidity and magnanimity of judgment which he possessed, we should note how entirely open-minded he was to the defects of those whom he most loved, and to the merits of those whom he chiefly condemned. His ideal in poetry is essentially Wordsworthian, yet how sternly and how honestly he marks the *longueurs* of Wordsworth, his flatness, his mass of inferior work. Arnold's ideal of poetry was essentially alien to Byron, whose vulgar, slipshod, rhetorical manner he detested, whilst he recognised Byron's Titanic power: 'our *soul* had felt him like the thunder's roll.' Arnold saw all the blunders made by Dryden, by Pope, by Johnson, by Macaulay, by Coleridge, by Carlyle — but how heartily he can seize their real merits! Though drawn by all his thoughts and tastes towards such writers as Sénancour, Amiel, Joubert, Heine, the Guérins, he does not affect to forget



the limitations of their influence, and the idiosyncrasy of their genius. In these days, when we are constantly assured that the function of criticism is to seize on some subtle and yet undetected quality that happens to have charmed you, and to wonder, in Delphic oracles, if Milton or Shelley ever quite touched that mystic circle, how refreshing it is to find Arnold always cool, always judicial — telling us even that Shakespeare has let drop some random stuff, and calmly reminding us that he had not ‘the sureness of a perfect style,’ as Milton had. Let us take together Arnold’s summing up of all the qualities of Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, Shelley, and we shall see with what a just but loving hand he distributes the alternate need of praise and blame. *Amant alternâ Camænæ.* But of all the Muses, she of criticism loves most the alternate modulation of *soprano* and *basso*.

Not that Arnold was invariably right, or that all his judgments are unassailable. His canons were always right; but it is not in mortals to apply them unerringly to men and to things. He seems somewhat inclined to undervalue Tennyson, of whom he speaks so little. He has not said enough for Shelley, perhaps not enough for Spencer, nor can we find that he loved with the true ardour the glorious romances of Walter Scott. But this is no place, nor can I pretend to be the man, to criticise our critic. For my own part, I accept his decisions in the main for all English poetry, and on general questions of style. Accept them, that is, so far as it is in human nature to accept such high matters; — ‘errors excepted,’ *exceptis excipiendis*. The important point on which his judgment is the most likely to be doubted or reversed by the supreme court of the twentieth century, lies in the relative places he has assigned to Wordsworth and to Shelley. He was by nature akin to Wordsworth, alien to

Shelley; and the 'personal equation' may have told in this case. For my own part, I feel grateful to Arnold for asserting so well the dæmonic power of Byron, and so justly distinguishing the poet in his hour of inspiration from the peer in his career of affectation and vice. Arnold's piece on the 'Study of Poetry,' written as an introduction to the collected *English Poets*, should be preserved in our literature as the *norma*, or *canon* of right opinion about poetry, as we preserve the standard coins in the Pyx, or the standard yard measure in the old Jewel-house at Westminster.

### III. THE PHILOSOPHER AND THEOLOGIAN

Matthew Arnold, the philosopher, the politician, the theologian, does not need prolonged notice, inasmuch as he was anxious to disclaim any title to be ranked as any one of the three. But he entered into many a keen debate on philosophy, politics, and religion; and, whilst disavowing for himself any kind of system of belief, he sate in judgment on the beliefs of others, and assured us that the mission of Culture was to be supreme Court of Appeal for all the brutalities of the vulgar, and all the immaturities of the ignorant. Indeed, since the very definition of Culture was 'to know the best that had ever been done and said,' to be 'a study of perfection,' 'to see things as they really are,' this Delphic priest of Culture was compelled to give us oracles about all the dark problems that harass the souls of philosophers, of politicians, and of theologians. He admitted this sacred duty, and manfully he strove to interpret the inspirations of the God within him. They were often charged with insight and wisdom; they were sometimes entirely mysterious; they frequently became a matter of language rather than of

fact. But these responses of the Deity have found no successor. Nor does any living Mentor now attempt to guide our halting steps into the true path of all that should be done or may be known, with the same sure sense of serene omniscience.

Of Culture — which has so long been a synonym for our dear lost friend — it can hardly be expected that I should speak. I said what I had to say nearly thirty years ago, and I rejoice now to learn from his letters that my little piece gave him such innocent pleasure. He continued to rejoin for years; but, having fully considered all his words, I have nothing to qualify or unsay. We are most of us trying to get what of Culture we can master, to see things as they are, to know the best, to attain to some little measure of Sweetness and Light — and we can only regret that our great Master in all these things has carried his secret to the grave. The mystery still remains, *what* is best, *how* are things really as they are, by *what* means can we attain to perfection? Alas! the oracles are dumb. Apollo from his shrine can no more divine.

What we find so perplexing is, that the Master, who, in judging poetry and literature, had most definite principles, clear-cut canons of judgment, and very strict tests of good and bad, doctrines which he was always ready to expound, and always able to teach others, no sooner passes into philosophy, into politics, into theology, than he disclaims any system, principles, or doctrines of any kind. 'Oh!' we hear him cry, 'I am no philosopher, no politician, no theologian. I am merely telling you, in my careless, artless way, what you should think and do in these high matters. Culture whispers it to me, and I tell you; and only the Philistines, Anarchs, and Obscurantists object.' Now, it is obvious that no man can honestly dispose of all that lies *inter apices* of Philosophy, Politics,

and Religion, unless he have some scheme of dominant ideas. If he cannot range himself under any of the known schemes, if he be neither intuitionist, experimentalist, or eclectic, if he incline neither to authority, nor to freedom, neither to revelation, nor to skepticism, nor to any of the ways of thinking that lie between any of these extremes — then he must have a brand-new, self-originated, dominant scheme of his own. If he tends towards no system of ideas, then he tends to his own system; and this is usually the narrowest and most capricious system that can be invented.

Not that Matthew Arnold's judgments in these things were narrow, however personal. It would be easy to show, if this were the place, what were the schools and orders of thought under which he ranged himself. The idea that he was an Ariel, a 'blessed Glendoveer,' or Mahatma of Light, was a charming bit of playfulness that relieved the tedium of debate. Whether as much as he fancied was gained to the cause of Sweetness by presenting the other side in fantastic costumes and airy caricature, by the iteration of nicknames, and the fustigation of dummy opponents, is now rather open to doubt. The public, and he himself, began to feel that he was carrying a joke too far when he brought the Trinity into the pantomine. Some of his playmates, it is said, rather enjoyed seeing themselves on the stage, and positively played up to harlequin and his wand. And it was good fun to all of us to see our friends and acquaintances in motley, capering about to so droll a measure.

With his refined and varied learning, his natural acuteness, and his rare gift of poetic insight, Matthew Arnold made some admirable suggestions in general philosophy. How true, how fruitful are his sayings about Hebraism and Hellenism, about Greece and Israel, about the true

strength of Catholicism, about Pagan and Mediæval religious sentiment, about Spinoza, about Butler, Marcus Aurelius, and Goethe ! And how valuable are his hints about education ! All of these, and many more, are radically sound, and gain much by the pellucid grace and precision with which they are presented. They are presented, it is true, rather as the treasure-trove of instinctive taste than as the laborious conclusions of any profound logic ; for Culture, as we have often said, naturally approached even the problems of the Universe, not so much from the side of Metaphysics as from the side of *Belles Lettres*. I can remember Matthew Arnold telling us with triumph that he had sought to exclude from a certain library a work of Herbert Spencer, by reading to the committee a passage therefrom which he pronounced to be clumsy in style. He knew as little about Spencer's *Synthetic Philosophy* as he did about Comte's, which he pretended to discuss with an air of laughable superiority, at which no doubt he was himself the first to laugh.

Arnold, indeed, like M. Jourdain, was constantly talking Comte without knowing it, and was quite delighted to find how cleverly he could do it. There is a charming and really grand passage in which he sums up his *conclusion* at the close of his *Culture and Anarchy*. I cannot resist the pleasure of quoting this fine piece of English, every word of which I devoutly believe :—

But for us,—who believe in right reason, in the duty and possibility of extricating and elevating of our best self, in the progress of humanity towards perfection,—for us the framework of society, that theatre on which this august drama has to unroll itself, is sacred; and whoever administers it, and however we may seek to remove them from their tenure of administration, yet while they administer, we steadily and with undivided heart support them in repressing anarchy and disorder; because without order there can be no society, and without society there can be no human perfection.

It so happens that this, the summing up of the mission of Culture, is entirely and exactly the mission of Positivism, and is even expressed in the very language used by Comte in all his writings, and notably in his *Appeal to Conservatives* (1855). How pleasantly we can fancy Culture now meeting the Founder of Positivism in some Elysian Fields, and accosting him in that inimitably genial way: 'Ah, well! I see now that we were not so far apart, but I never had patience to read your rather dry French, you know!'

Of his Theology, or his Anti-Theology, even less need be said here. It was most interesting and pregnant, and was certainly the source of his great popularity and vogue. Here indeed he touched to the quick the Hebraism of our middle classes, the thought of our cultured classes, the insurgent instincts of the People. It was a singular mixture—Anglican divinity adjusted to the Pantheism of Spinoza—to parody a famous definition of Huxley's, it was Anglicanism *minus* Christianity, and even Theism. It is difficult for the poor Philistine to grasp the notion that all this devotional sympathy with the Psalmists, Prophets, and Evangelists, this beautiful enthusiasm for 'the secret of Jesus' and the 'profound originality' of Paul, was possible to a man whose intellect rejected the belief that there was even any probable evidence for the personality of God, or for the celestial immortality of the soul, who flatly denied the existence of miracle, and treated the entire fabric of dogmatic theology as a figment. Yet this is the truth: and what is more, this startling, and somewhat paradoxical, transformation scene of the Anglican creeds and formularies sank deep into the reflective minds of many thinking men and women, who could neither abandon the spiritual poetry of the Bible nor resist the demonstrations of science. The combination, amongst many combinations, is one that, in a different form, was taught by

Comte, which has earned for Positivism the title of Catholicism *plus* Science. Matthew Arnold, who but for his father's too early death might have been the son of a bishop, and who, in the last century, would himself have been a classical Dean, made an analogous and somewhat restricted combination that is properly described as Anglicanism *plus* Pantheism.

Let us think no more of his philosophy — the philosophy of an ardent reader of Plato, Spinoza, and Goethe: of his politics — the politics of an Oxford don who lived much at the Athenæum Club: nor of his theology — the theology of an English clergyman who had resigned his orders on conscientious grounds. We will think only of the subtle poet, the consummate critic, the generous spirit, the radiant intelligence, whose over-ambitious fancies are even now fading into oblivion — whose rare imaginings have yet to find a wider and a more discerning audience.

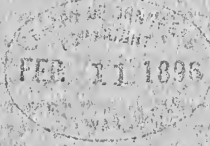




# MATTHEW ARNOLD

BY

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New York  
MACMILLAN AND CO.  
AND LONDON  
1896

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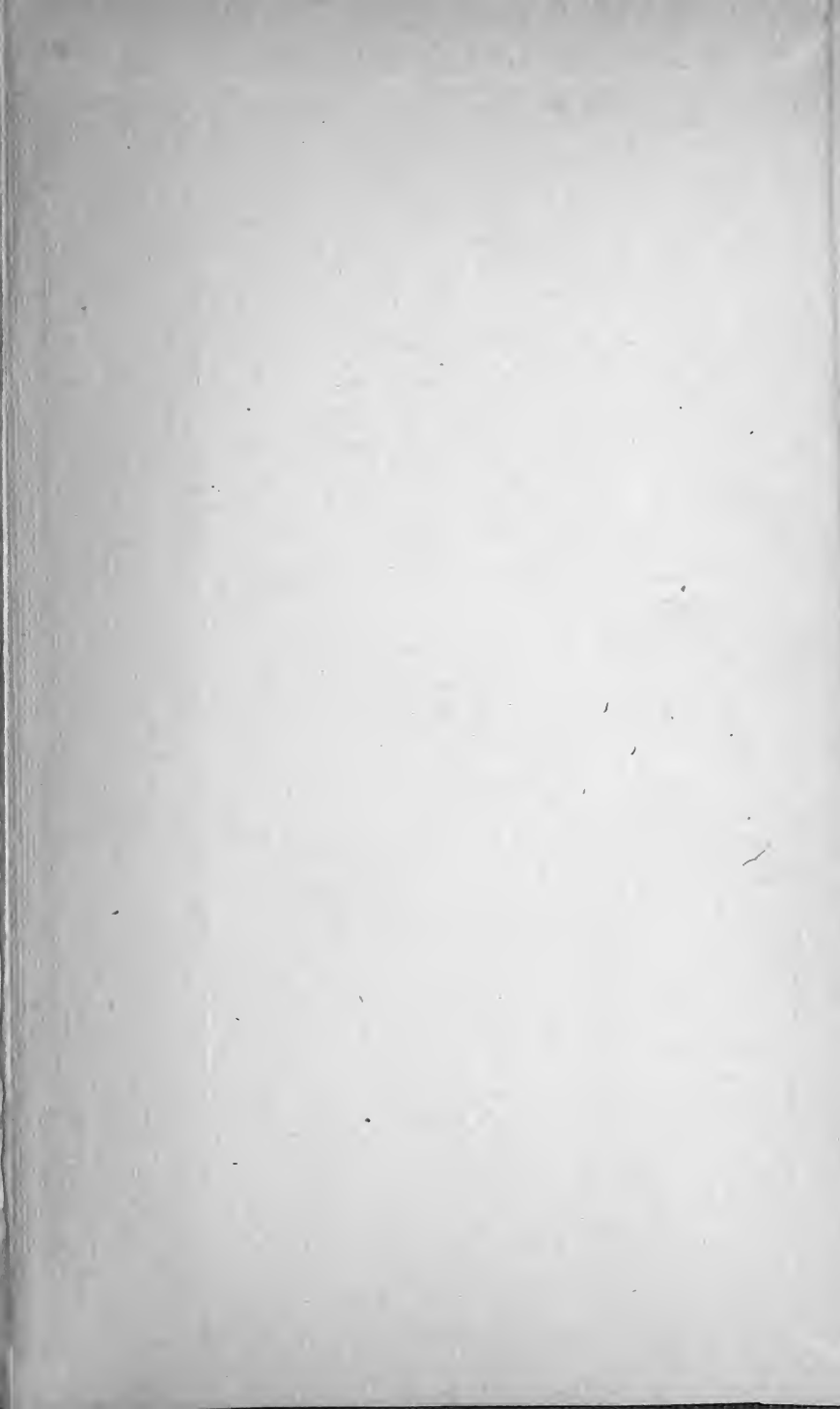












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